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SUBJECT: PRESS REPORTING FRENCH MORATORIUM ON COMMERCIAL BIOTECH
PRODUCTION

REF: PARIS 2439

¶1. Summary: On September 20, a "Le Monde" article, titled "France Turns Towards the End of GMOs," reported that the French government is considering freezing the sale of biotech seeds in 2008 pending legislation to more rigorously control biotechnology in France. This disclosure reportedly took agriculture analysts by surprise. Farmers expect a serious public debate on the future of biotechnology in France during ongoing environmental consultations, one part of the "Grenelle for the Environment." While sources in the parliament confirmed the possible freeze, other government sources claim no decisions regarding biotechnology have been taken. End Summary

¶2. The GOF is currently holding consultations on environmental topics through the "Grenelle for the Environment" (reftel) process. As reported reftel, the results of that process are expected to inform government policy regarding biotech production and research. "Le Monde" reported that Jean-Louis Borloo, State Minister for the Environment, met parliamentarians from the presidential majority on September 17. During this meeting, he is reported to have stated: "On GMOs, everybody agrees that dissemination can not be controlled, so, we can not take any risk." The article further stated that the GOF envisions a ban on sales of commercial biotech seeds (only MON810 seeds are approved for sale in France). Senator Jean Francois Le Grand, chairperson of the biotechnology consultation at the "Grenelle de l'Environnement" said that this would not be a moratorium per se, but a temporary ban until the government passes a law regulating biotechnology. He confirmed that the government has no intention to ban field testing nor in-lab research.

¶3. The article further reported that, at the initiative of public prosecutors, and possibly pursuant to orders from the Ministry of Justice, the prosecution of several anti-biotech activists, accused of destroying biotech test plots, had been indefinitely postponed. Almost 20 biotech corn fields, for research and commercial production, have already been destroyed in 2007 by anti-biotech activists.

¶4. The Le Monde report came the same day that the French arable crop association disclosed at its annual conference, for the first

time, public support for biotechnology for research and commercial production. Philippe Pinta, President of the association, looked stunned when he took the stage to disclose the potential biotech freeze. French Agriculture Minister Barnier, booed by the audience as he approached the podium at the farmers convention, limited his speech to less than five minutes. He denied in a short declaration that the government had made decision on the future of biotechnology. On September 21, Christophe Malvezin, agricultural advisor to President Sarkozy, confirmed to Ag Officer that the government would continue the consultations before taking any position. Sarkozy's spokesperson, Laurent Wauquiez, also issued an official confirmation of this position.

¶5. Pinta subsequently announced an emergency meeting of farm leaders. Several farm organizations planned to withdraw from the Grenelle discussions in reaction to the possibility that the government was taking decision before the end of the consultations. In Brussels, an EU Commission spokesperson confirmed that a French ban on EU-approved commercial GM seeds would be illegal and could generate hefty fines for France.

¶6. Anti-biotech organizations have called for the destruction of the 2007 French GM corn crop (some 60,000 acres). An anti-biotech demonstration is scheduled for September 22 in a small town in central France and a large march October 9 in Paris, culminating with a meeting on October 14. There are rumors that additional demonstrations may occur subsequently to pressure the GOF to enact a moratorium on biotechnology production.

PEKALA